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Adventures in assessment

In *Teaching History* 157, *Assessment Edition*, a number of different teachers shared the ways in which their departments were approaching the assessment and reporting of students' progress in a 'post-levels' world. This article adds to those examples, first by illustrating how teachers from different schools in the Bristol area are working together to examine, evaluate and build on others' ideas and then by presenting a further series of case studies of the particular strategies that individual departments have taken forward. In each case the teachers explain why those approaches have been valuable to them or particularly suitable, given the policies and constraints operating in their individual schools, and they acknowledge on-going areas for development.

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Introduction (Kate Hawkey)

The disapplication of National Curriculum levels from September 2014 was greeted with excitement and relief in schools and history departments up and down the country.¹ The many problems of reducing all assessment into level, and even sub-level, descriptions had finally been recognised and schools were being invited to do things differently. Of course, history was one of the subjects which had never had an easy relationship with levels, still less when their main purpose increasingly seemed to have become one of meeting data-driven managerial requests.² With levels consigned to the dustbin, here was an opportunity and a new-found freedom to exploit.

A group of teachers working in schools in and around Bristol decided to meet several times during the academic year to discuss ideas and share new approaches they were trying in their respective schools. I joined them and the Bristol Pizza Group was formed.³ We started by doing some reading, not only seminal journal articles which we thought were important, but also contributions from the blogosphere.⁴ We dipped into some general and current texts on assessment but were also keen to keep the focus solidly on history.⁵ The group identified what was realistic to take on and what was not. Other, more urgent, curricular changes at GCSE and A-level, as well as the number of non-specialists teaching at Key Stage 3, necessarily tempered our ambitions. The members of the group agreed to try out small-scale experiments in assessment within their departments. All were keen to contribute to assessment conversations happening in their schools and to shape any new system those schools might want to implement and there was always the worry that, if they did not start trying out the ideas that we discussed, they might find something less appropriate being imposed by senior leaders.

This article describes the activities of the Bristol Pizza Group during its first year. In our early conversations teachers recognised that being freed from the reductive practice of using levels gave them scope to focus instead on identifying what the teachers valued in their own classroom history and this, in turn, ensured a re-engagement with the purposes of a history curriculum. The group consulted others' recent contributions on this theme while some more 'home-grown ideas' also informed the conversation.⁶

There was consensus within the group that, in addition to valuing the second-order concepts that have underpinned so much of the work of history teachers, there was a need to ensure that substantive knowledge and concepts should be prioritised as well. The new National Curriculum for history not only highlights the need to address key 'abstract terms' such as 'empire' and 'parliament', but also aims to enable students to 'gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts.'⁷ The teachers were keen to ensure that they did not restrict their adventures in assessment to focusing simply on assessing single units of study, but also sought to tackle the challenge of building cumulative historical knowledge over time and across different units of work. The idea of growing knowledge as a resource to support students in getting better at history was one which members of the group

were keen to employ in their classrooms.⁸ Thinking about how to build knowledge across units of work and to move away from simply assessing each individual unit was both a challenge and the mainspring for the work of some of the teachers. Again, there were useful articles to read which informed individuals' thinking and subsequent planning.⁹ Two case studies in this article report the work carried out by Sally Thorne and Philip Arkinstall, concerned with developing historical perspective which stretches beyond the time-frame of the individual unit with the aim of building and securing knowledge over time.

Other practices, which the group agreed upon as being central to assessment's role in supporting student learning, were first, the importance of using mark-schemes specific to the enquiry on which students are currently focusing; and second, the importance of conducting regular, low-stakes, classroom assessments, not least to check for the 'chronologically lost'.¹⁰

Any discussion of assessment without levels necessarily needs to engage with the issue of ensuring that feedback is meaningful, not only to support student learning, but also to provide useful information to other relevant parties such as parents. The two case studies by Matthew Bryant and David Rawlings report their work focusing on forms of feedback that highlight the priorities for students' future development rather than concentrating on whether (or not) they have 'hit' a particular target.

Finally, Richard Kennett and Adele Fletcher's case study reports how one history department devised their own model of progression, drawing from a review of their classroom practice.

In summary, the members of the Bristol Pizza Group identified and, in various ways, sought to address some of the important issues raised and opportunities presented by assessment without levels. Figure 1 indicates where each of these elements is discussed within the article.

How successful has the first year of the Bristol Pizza Group been? Everyone involved has implemented a small-scale initiative within their own history classroom. We have shared this work at the Historical Association's national conference (and are now presenting it to the readers of *Teaching History*!)¹¹ Just as important, we have shared our ideas and strategies with colleagues in our own schools and some of us are now taking a lead on whole-school approaches to assessment without levels. Working within a critically supportive group in this kind of exploratory and collaborative manner has been invaluable and is an approach with which we will continue. While some schools may have been lured by 'off-the-peg' commercial solutions, we have moved in a very different direction; one which has developed our confidence and agency in really getting to grips with these challenges. Suffice to say, no one is planning on leaving the Bristol Pizza Group, and others are looking to join us, as we turn our attention to new challenges in the teaching of history. We would encourage others to take those simple small steps to develop their own grass roots, local networks to support purposeful curriculum and professional development.

Case Study 1: Building and securing knowledge over time (Sally Thorne)

I must admit that I had largely eschewed time-lines with my classes up until this year. I think it stemmed from a lesson I had taught as a newly-qualified teacher, when a student asked me repeatedly and with increasing frustration, 'Yes, but, how do I draw a 7cm line?' while holding a pencil and a ruler. Time-lines were clearly too hard (for student and teacher), I decided, and promptly disengaged from them.

The depressing realisation that my GCSE and A-level students were unpractised in the art of time-line construction forced my hand this year, though. Time-lines can help by making trends and patterns more visible: change and continuity in punishments and law courts are so much easier to spot; struggles with the thematic structure of the AS unit on Mussolini are soothed by simple colour-coding. I doggedly returned to my Key Stage 3 schemes of work to see where I could put in the practice the students would need to make 'time-lining' second nature at GCSE and beyond. In so doing, I realised that this suited me as well. It is a standing joke in our history department that I am obsessed with mind maps and other graphic representations of knowledge.

Previously, on the rare occasions where I had used them, time-lines had fallen at the start of units of work to encourage students to recap on key time periods. This time, however, I started putting them in at the end. They have worked admirably as assessment tools for the thematic units we include across the key stage. As well as giving students a clear idea of progress over time, the use of time-lines has helped them to stretch beyond the describe/explain/analyse frame of the traditional assessment essay that we might have used in the past, encouraging them to make generalisations about change over time and to use their learning, wider reading and prior knowledge to theorise about periods of rapid change, or continuity. Having repeated this type of task at the beginning and end of the year, with a scattering of smaller time-line tasks within lessons, I have been encouraged by how much better the students now are at understanding change and continuity and by the ways in which the process has helped many of them to get right to the heart of an assessment question instead of spending all their time listing factors in one long essay.

I combined my time-line instructions with some attempts at open-ended questions to encourage some 'big picture' thinking. Latterly, this has encouraged me to think more about the big ideas that underpin disciplinary history and to try to steer my students into grappling with the 'threshold concepts' – those fundamental (and often counter-intuitive) ideas about how the subject works that play such a crucial role in enabling them to make progress (for example, by grasping the distinction between change as a *process* rather than a single event).¹²

Although Year 7 students struggled in the early stages, the fact that I went on setting them similar types of time-line tasks meant that they learned both to handle the technical elements of drawing and labelling an appropriate scale and

Figure 1: Elements of good practice in assessment without levels

1	A renewed focus on what is valued in history classrooms and a re-engagement with purposes of a history curriculum	Introduction: Kate Hawkey
2	Building and securing knowledge over time	Case study 1: Sally Thorne Case study 2: Philip Arkinstall
3	Feedback	Case study 3: Involving parents: Matthew Bryant Case study 4: Focus on the target not the level: David Rawlings
4	Designing a home-grown model for progression	Case study 5: Richard Kennett and Adele Fletcher

to provide sufficient detail in their annotations or responses to the open-ended questions.

The consideration of threshold concepts has also helped me to devise a new assessment model that is in line with the whole-school policy devised for our use from September 2015. Officially students' work at Key Stage 3 is now being assessed in relation to GCSE criteria so that progress towards that all-important grade 9 can be followed all the way through from Year 7.¹³ While the details of this policy continue to remain somewhat mysterious and advice has been thin on the ground, I have tackled its implementation in a number of different ways.

First, I have rewritten our assessment model around the GCSE assessment objectives – substantive knowledge, second-order concepts, sources and interpretations.¹⁴ Second, I have spent a lot of time thinking about how threshold concepts can better assist my students in working towards being excellent historians as well as achieving top GCSE grades.¹⁵ Finally, I am mapping key areas of content through our Key Stage 3 programme of study. Thinking about Counsell's concept of residue knowledge has encouraged me to concentrate on what my students need to know to make their passage to the GCSE exam as smooth as possible.¹⁶ An enlightening conversation with an Ofsted inspector, who observed me teaching a lesson to Year 10 on a thousand years of British history in preparation for the start of the Crime and Punishment study, brought home to me the disservice we were doing our students by not teaching them anything of the intricacies of medieval monarchic power before they got to GCSE.¹⁷ 'At its heart, for the Middle Ages, this study is all about the power of the king, wouldn't you say?' questioned the inspector. And thus, a new Year 7 unit was born.

Having made provisional choices for our GCSE from 2016, I identified key knowledge that would provide the necessary foundation for students studying these options and set about ensuring that it was built into our programmes of study, as shown in Figure 2.¹⁸ While still provisional, the programme demonstrates the links between the enquiries that we are currently following and other units both within and beyond the key stage. Once completed, it will also reflect the different assessment objectives to be tackled within each unit and

will allow students to build up their layers of knowledge by revisiting themes and topics from alternative points of view at various points through Key Stage 3. A study of the transatlantic slave trade in Year 7, for example, is revisited in Year 8 with a study of abolition in the context of changing Britain 1750-1900; it also lays important groundwork for our new A-level. A consideration of the power of the Church in medieval Britain, studied in Year 7 as part of an enquiry into threats faced by medieval monarchs, is revisited in Year 8 when students consider the impact of the Crusades on the British diet and will provide important context for their study of Medicine through Time. Adding a lesson on Edward II's treatment of the Jews to the Medieval Monarchs scheme of work and including in Year 8 a study of East End immigrants in the context of the Jack the Ripper case enables students to have a deeper knowledge of Jewish history and of the long roots of anti-Semitism when they come to study the causes of the Holocaust in Year 9.

In summary, revisiting knowledge in this way ensures that students naturally begin to enlarge their focus beyond the frame of the unit they are currently studying and so start to recognise the interconnected nature of history.

Case Study 2: Building and securing knowledge over time (Philip Arkinstall)

My two examples were founded on an area of research that was first taken up by Dylan Wiliam who claimed that he wanted to create 'testing worth teaching to'.¹⁹ He wanted to ensure that assessments were rigorous and challenging and of benefit to students. In my own context I wanted assessment tasks that would provide scope for students to demonstrate their skills as historians, drawing both on substantive knowledge and on their use of the second-order concepts set out in the National Curriculum.²⁰ In a similar vein, Harry Fletcher-Wood in his injunction 'don't value what you measure, measure what you value', has argued that assessment for learning should be meaningful, with the purpose of developing good history.²¹

What Wiliam and Fletcher-Wood both talk about is making assessments clear and designed to enhance the students' understanding and mastery of the subject. Fletcher-Wood rails that the prescribed content is too narrow and does not do enough to develop a wider appreciation of history. In his own practice, he has broadened his assessment tasks to include a focus on how students' perceptions of the discipline, themselves and the world have changed. Drawing from these ideas, I wanted to explore ways of removing the levels and giving the students assessment tasks which were more open to interpretation to allow them to show me what they had understood and to develop a style of their own. This is where our department decided to focus our attention.

Before creating new assessment tasks, the department discussed what we thought 'good history' looked like. Our starting point was the National Curriculum subject statement.²² From this a new assessment for Year 8 was designed which gave students the opportunity to construct a piece of writing independently which would 'analyse trends within periods and over long arcs of time'.²³

Example 1: Stretching beyond the individual unit without the constraints of levels – English Civil War diary

Having struggled for a few years to find an appropriate way to teach and assess Year 8 students' learning in relation to the English Civil War, I decided that it was time to rewrite this scheme of work and to put in place something more engaging and enquiry-based. The aim was to take students on a journey through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries using local and national events to tell the story of the English Civil War, ultimately culminating in a reflective response drawing on students' historical perspective and chronological awareness to reach a conclusion. Causation was the second-order concept that I wanted to prioritise but instead of giving the class the traditional mark-scheme, with a hierarchy of levels, I provided broad guidance for the task which included some specific features of good historical writing that I expected them to include (see Figure 3). In doing this, and drawing from much scholarship in history education, I wanted to create an opportunity for students to write more creatively without the constraints of tightly-defined levels. Mark King, at Stanground Academy, Peterborough, has experimented with a similar approach to improve written responses among his Year 7 students.²⁴ His findings stress the centrality of building secure knowledge in place of an emphasis on scaffolding the task and reveal that when students work in this way there tends to be considerable 'diversity across their essays'.²⁵

In order to secure the knowledge that they would need, in the lessons taught prior to the execution of the task, students were regularly tested on what they could recall from previous lessons and across units. These tests took the form of ten simple factual knowledge questions, which required students to recall specific events and the meaning of key terms – such as the Divine Right of Kings. The ultimate aim was that the class would be able to draw accurately upon their knowledge to answer the enquiry effectively.

The question which threaded through the sequence of lessons was 'Would you have killed the King?' In focusing on empathetic work, we were alert to potential difficulties; the lessons were built up to slowly introduce students to life at that time and then through careful scaffolding and questioning they were asked to create their own characters using information and sources from the period. There are pitfalls associated with the use of empathetic questions, not least in using the second person pronoun and asking students to assume the identity of characters from the seventeenth century.²⁶ It is not easy for students to avoid imposing their own values on the past, rather than putting on a 'seventeenth-century hat' to consider views 'at the time'.²⁷ Some students certainly struggled with this, describing the death of the king as 'barbaric', for example, which although a perfectly justifiable response, lacked any reference to seventeenth-century values or attitudes.

Nonetheless, the overall results were promising. First, since the assessment had provided students with more independence than previously, their responses were less formulaic and much more varied in style. Some of the more able students brought other relevant historical events that they could remember into their writing, such as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and Mary's counter-reformation. It appeared that they had been released from the restrictions of worrying about what to include in a top-level answer and could write with confidence without having tight direction. Clearly, there is more work to be done here, but by allowing students more freedom they were able to refer to examples from previous study, allowing them to stretch beyond the individual unit while also creating opportunities to write without the constraints of levelled assessment criteria.

Example 2: Open-ended homework task – a theme across time

The second activity was much shorter and centred around an idea trialled by Fletcher-Wood, who asked his students a variety of open-ended questions designed to explore their wider appreciation and understanding of history without providing copious guidance.²⁸ The aim was to get Year 8 students thinking about other historical episodes that they could draw upon to reach conclusions about a theme across time. I limited their writing-space to ensure that their responses were succinct and hoped that they could make a reasoned conclusion using a mixture of knowledge from topics that we had studied recently as well as from those taught earlier in the year and indeed from their own prior knowledge.

This proved hugely successful. Students who were liberated from a writing frame with a suggested structure and key words were free to make any reasoned arguments that they wanted. The question I posed was 'How has the nature of religion changed in 100 years?' The date range provided was 1549 to 1649, which encompassed the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth I and Charles I. The examples in Figure 4 illustrate some of the responses given. The tell-tale sign of success was that the students were using knowledge

Figure 2: Matravers School Key Stage 3 Programme of Study (provisional)

Year 7			
Unit	Title	Feed back	Feed forward
H1 Britain before 1066	Why was Britain such a prize 1,000 years ago?	Recap of primary school history	
H2 1066	Why did William the Conqueror win the Battle of Hastings?		Year 7 – H3
H3 Medieval monarchs	What was the biggest threat to medieval monarchs?	Year 7 – H2	Year 9 – H15 GCSE – Church control in the Middle Ages (Medicine)
H4 Tudors	Interpretations of the Tudors – to be confirmed		Year 8 – H7 GCSE – Elizabeth I, Medicine GCSE – sources, interpretations
H5 Slave trade	Should Westbury be proud of its town hall?		Year 8 – H9 A-level – Unit 2 – American Revolution A-level – Unit 4 – Transatlantic slave trade
H6 Renaissance Enlightenment	How far did European minds change by 1750?		Year 8 – H8 GCSE – the rise of science (Medicine)

Year 8			
Unit	Title	Feed back	Feed forward
H7 British diet through time	What has had the biggest impact on British diet since the year 1000?	Year 7 – H3 Year 7 – H4	GCSE – thematic study
H8 Making of the UK	Should there be a United Kingdom?		Year 8 – H11
H9 Building modern Britain	What had the biggest impact on Britain by 1900?	Year 7 – H5 Year 8 – H7	GCSE – public health A-level – unit 3 (Rise of Empire) A-level – unit 4
H10 Jack the Ripper	Why were immigrants blamed for the Jack the Ripper murders?	Year 7 – H1 Year 8 – H9	GCSE - source work
H11 Democracy and freedom	Why have we got the right to vote in Britain?	Year 7 – H3 Year 8 – H8	GCSE – thematic study

Year 9			
Unit	Title	Feed back	Feed forward
H13 World War I	Why did men stand and fight in World War I?		GCSE – Medicine on the Western Front GCSE – source work
H14 The interwar period	‘Spin the globe’-type unit: encompassing interwar Britain, America, Russia and Germany (and possibly India)	Year 9 – H13 Possibly Year 8 – H9	Year 9 – H15 GCSE – Russia A-level – unit 1 (20th-century British political history)
H15 Holocaust	How far was Hitler responsible for the Holocaust?	Year 7 – H3 Year 8 – H9	
H16 World War II	Why did the Allies win World War II?	Year 9 – H14	Year 9 – H17 GCSE – Cold War
H17 1960s	How did human rights change after World War II? (working title)	Should cover most KS3 topics	GCSE – Cold War
H18 Wiltshire	How important is Wessex?		

Figure 3: Instructions to Year 8 for their reflections on the decision to kill the king

Assessment: Would you have killed the king?

You are going to write a final diary extract answering that question. Use the following to help you write it:

1. It's after the execution on 30 January 1649. Describe the scene outside the Banqueting House.
2. Discuss the reasons put forward for killing the king. (What had he done wrong?)
3. Discuss the reasons why Parliament was seen as overstepping their mark. (What had they done wrong or what had Charles not understood?)
4. How does your character feel about it?

What would be a good piece of historical writing?

- A. Use historical words to be factually accurate (e.g. Axe man, Banqueting House, Divine Right of Kings, January 1649).
- B. Make reference to similar things happening in the past – link to previous historical episodes.
- C. When you describe the reasons for the Civil War make clear your own opinion, showing whether you think the reasons are valid or not.

recalled from topics taught back in September to make their judgements.

In the first example within Figure 4 the student has tackled the question by comparing the start and endpoints of the time period. They recognise that the question relates to the reigns of Henry VIII and Charles I respectively. The student's use of phrases such as 'changed dramatically' indicates that they are starting to qualify their opinions, giving a sense of the scale of change. This bodes well for tackling future tasks, revealing that members of the class are taking on board the concept of 'how far' an event or person may have changed. The personal opinion, '...the reason for this I Believe [sic] is the country gaining confidence' also suggests a degree of confidence in their writing and in their capacity to explain the thinking behind it.

Example 2 is different. Although the student has ignored the date range or was unaware of the 65-year time difference between the Stuarts and the Georgians, they acknowledge Elizabeth's early determination to steer a 'middle way' in contrast to the emphatic hostility to Catholicism evident under the Georgians. Since I had only taught Year 8 about the Tudors and early Stuarts, this appreciation of the Georgians was 'untaught' and showed that this particular individual had gone away and done more research around the topic of religion. Another problem with this answer was the way in which the student approached the issue in terms of judging which period was 'best', which relied on a very twenty-first century standard of judgement. This student has, however, sought to identify criteria according to which they

could make a comparison between periods; in this case the toleration of different religious views.

The outcomes demonstrated to me that some students had seen this exercise as a simple brief descriptive account of what kings and queens had done to religion. In other cases, such as Example 1, I was able to see what knowledge students had chosen to retain and how they shaped this into an opinion. My teaching would take this into account as we went on to explore the industrial revolution. I could see that I also needed to embed more appropriate vocabulary into lessons, to ensure a wider range of terminology was deployed when offering an opinion, and to tackle the issue of imposing twenty-first-century values on our interpretation of particular concepts in the past.

In conclusion, my experiment has given our department the evidence and encouragement that these more open tasks are both accessible and well worth developing further. It has demonstrated that we should offer opportunities for students to draw from their wider historical knowledge, without the constraints of level-driven assessment criteria, and that we should not be afraid to reduce teacher input from time to time. Certainly some scaffolding may still be necessary for the less able students who may struggle with either recalling knowledge or articulating their thoughts. None the less, the benefits of having students writing independently, making connections between significant events and pursuing a challenging enquiry leads us back to the point of teaching history: to enhance the development of students' historical knowledge and understanding.

Homework task:

Thinking about the century (1549-1649) as a whole, answer the following question using examples and explanation: How has the nature of religion changed in 100 years?

Example 1 [as written]

The nature of religion in the 100 years between 1549-1649 has changed dramatically. Although a country changing its religion is considered major I believe that it isn't notably important as it has changed so many times. At the start of this century Henry 8th ruled the country, beheading anyone who opposed him but within that 100 years people gained more rights, the century ended with King Charles 1st's execution. The reason for this I believe is the country gaining confidence because of slackened punishment, leading to rebellions opposing the king's religious views. To sum up, at the end of the century, the public are more extreme about their religion, lowering the king's authority.

Example 2 [as written]

As the throne changed from monarch to monarch so did the main religion. When Charles 1st became King the country became Catholic because his wife was Catholic and showed what the Catholic church were like. Charles liked the fashion and made more Catholic churches. Elizabeth was protestant but let Catholics worship as she wanted an equal country. Then the Georgians came along and messed up the equal country by declaring that everyone should be protestant. When the country was equal there was less civil wars which means that Elizabeth's way worked better.

Case Study 3: Involving parents (Matthew Bryant)

Assessment can serve a myriad of purposes for teachers, students and parents. Too often I have neglected the last of these stakeholders – waiting for a five-minute discussion at parents' evening to inform parents of their child's progress. I therefore wanted to make this the focus of my work on assessment without levels this year.

Rwanda: Why did genocide happen?

Step 1: Assessment preparation

In humanities, the history and religious studies teachers work together teaching a shared scheme of work on genocide, which culminates in an assessed piece of work. The unit encompasses a number of different genocides over time and includes an opportunity to listen to a Holocaust survivor before the final depth study on Rwanda. Within the scheme of work leading up to the assessment task we spent a lesson practising written explanation of a single cause. This involved the use of class discussion and the development of success criteria as well as peer and self-assessment, and teacher monitoring. The following lesson built on this process: students re-wrote their answer on a separate piece of paper which was then stuck over the top of their original paragraph. This 'flip flap' exercise allowed them to see the two paragraphs together and, after more peer-marking, helped them to understand the qualities that they needed to develop in their writing.

Step 2: Assessment

Over the next few lessons students examined the genocide in greater depth before finishing the unit with the assessment task, answering the question 'Why did genocide happen in Rwanda?' Once again the students, as a class and supported by the teacher, had to devise their own success criteria, helping them to think critically about the qualities that they needed to demonstrate in their work. They completed the task and peer-marked it based on the mark-scheme that we had generated together, before I took the work in to check. For some, the peer-marking was done accurately and effectively while for others I needed to provide more support and guidance.

Step 3: Feedback and parental checking

In handing back their work the following lesson, students were told that their homework would be to take their assessment home and explain to their parents how they needed to improve in history. Parents were asked to sign the students' assessed work in acknowledgement. Prior to this, however, students had to review their work and rewrite one section of their original response to show that they understood how to improve. While this was undoubtedly time-consuming, the knowledge that they would be taking this work home encouraged the students to concentrate. The following lesson I went round checking parental signatures and most parents had not only signed to indicate that they had discussed the work but also written a short comment.

As a follow-up I have tried similar parental 'sign-offs' with other year groups. Formal student feedback on this process suggests they have valued this kind of parental involvement. Most parents like to know how to support their child,

which was something that the National Curriculum levels did not readily offer. Now an interested parent can see the progression in their child's work alongside an explanation of what they should now be working on. Our next task is to experiment with colour-coding progress so parents can see whether or not their child is 'on target' – i.e. making the progress expected of them.

Case Study 4:

Focus on the target not the level (David Rawlings)

The formal dissolution of levels presented history teachers with a golden opportunity to seize back ownership of assessment of progression in our subject areas and my department was keen to respond. We agreed with Fletcher-Wood that, 'expecting linear progress through sub-divided National Curriculum levels is intellectually dishonest'.²⁹ Instead, progress is a much messier business, often made through a series of successes and failures. Doing away with a linear levels system of progression has created the opportunity to focus on a more formative model for

Figure 5: Guidance on 'explanation'

When a question asks you to 'explain' or asks 'why?' you have to go further than telling a story.

You need to give reasons. Do this using a PEE paragraph.

You are aiming to tell the reader WHY your evidence is relevant. How does it support your point?

Use connectives like:

This meant that ...

As a result ...

Therefore ...

Consequently ...

Due to ...

For example:

'Why did the chicken cross the road?'

- A. The chicken crossed the road because it was running away from a fox.
- B. We know this because a fox was seen chasing the chicken.
- C. Foxes eat chickens therefore the chicken needed to put as much distance between itself and the fox as possible to stay alive.

assessment. However, as Fordham has argued, 'the main issue comes in terms of tracking pupils'.³⁰ Fletcher-Wood has described his use of formative mark-books, with comments on links made, skills developed, and depth of historical understanding as demonstrated in assessment tasks. Our plan was to take this one step further and structure our assessment model entirely (or as far as possible) around the formative target.

There is one important caveat to note. I was working in a Welsh school where a focus on 'skills' was still prioritised. This shaped our work and brought with it limitations which we return to discuss in the reflections section.

Step 1: Good history?

Embracing this new opportunity, the project began with a conversation within the department discussing our own ideas of what good history looks like. The result was a range of 'skills' that we considered to meet our expectations of good history. We were not altogether happy with the term, although the focus on 'skills' was prioritised in the Welsh context in which I was working at the time. These skills were: 'explanation', 'comparison', 'evaluation' and what we called 'critical evaluation' (for want of a better title), which involved the critical use of historical sources as evidence. We wanted to support students in developing each of these elements and thus to improve their historical understanding. We recognised that there is a hierarchy within *each* of these 'skill' areas and were concerned that students should recognise the scope to improve the expression of their knowledge and understanding in each of these ways. We sought to clarify for our students what each of these terms meant by providing detailed descriptors of what each of these processes might look like in historical writing.

Step 2: QR codes, videos and focus on the target

Having developed these descriptions, our next priority was to structure our feedback to students about their assessment task by focusing on a formative target. Importantly, we presented this feedback using technology to make it easier for students to access further advice on how to get better at the particular 'skill' identified as a target. We created videos that explained each of the targets in depth: for example, by exemplifying the elements to be found in a good 'explanation' (as illustrated in Figure 5). We assigned QR codes to each of these videos and built them into a mat (Figure 6) that could be stuck to desks, walls or in books. Learners were individually assigned a specific target for the next lesson or piece of work. They then used the relevant QR code to access the video and formulate success criteria for how they could progress in relation to that particular 'skill'.

Step 3: Feedback

As highlighted earlier, we anticipated that feedback would be the major stumbling block. We gave formative feedback on how well learners had met their devised criteria and which criteria to re-visit as they made their improvements. Our summative feedback was expressed through colour-coding, with the outcome for each assessed task assigned

Figure 6: QR Mat

History skills

Getting better in history means mastering certain skills.
Each skill builds on the one that comes before it.

<p style="text-align: center;">1 Target skill – Explain</p> <p>Being able to explain means that you can develop a point/fact/opinion and tell the reader what it means. You can use information to fully answer questions.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">2 Target skill – Compare</p> <p>Comparing is being able to look at two or more things and explain differences and/or similarities.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">3 Target skill – Evaluate</p> <p>Evaluating is all about weighing up different sides of an argument to make a judgement.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4 Target skill – Critically evaluate</p> <p>To evaluate critically you must assess how far you agree with the evidence that supports a point of view</p>

a particular colour to indicate the student's progress in relation to previous work: red for little or no progress; amber for average progress; green for good progress and blue for excellent progress.

Reflections

The approach we developed really focused on feedback and made it easy for students to access further advice, which was its key strength. The success of our model was demonstrated by the change in the language of learning in our classrooms. Learners became less preoccupied with knowing their level and began to communicate in terms of the particular skills that they were looking to improve. A middle-ability Year 9 learner, for example, articulated his need to 'weigh up the strengths and weaknesses' of an interpretation. It appeared that the formative element of this experiment was working. Furthermore, our summative tracking through the 'BRAG' system gave us a snapshot of progress and allowed us to identify underachievement quickly and, in this way, was useful as a fairly rough-and-ready data-tracking tool.

Nevertheless, in our review meeting, we were far from being convinced that the focus on 'skills' was enough. Although it was in keeping with the priorities within Welsh schools, it seemed to mean that we were neglecting the quality of students' subject knowledge. We agreed with Jamie Byrom that one of the strengths of the new curriculum was that it did 'take substantive historical knowledge seriously'.³¹ We have returned to Lee and Shemilt's work to think about the importance of historical knowledge in a model for progression. While they suggested that 'progression' (in

history) can be juxtaposed with 'aggregation' (the simple accumulation of more factual knowledge) this was *not* a claim that progress could be achieved without that knowledge.³² Ensuring a balance was identified as our next priority.

Case Study 5: Designing a home-grown model for progression without 'throwing the baby out with the bath water.' (Richard Kennett and Adele Fletcher)

Unlike some of the schools represented in the Bristol Pizza Group, our school, Redland Green, made the decision to scrap National Curriculum levels and individual departments were given relatively free rein to create an alternative. To start the process each department was told to define what progress looks like in their individual subject area. A basic framework of three levels of competency (yes, there are still levels of a sort) – 'Core', 'Combine' and 'Create' supported with some notional 'skills' that roughly fitted a Bloomsian/SOLO model were provided by the senior leadership team as a starting point.³³ These are set out in the first three columns on the left of Figure 7.

The history department sat down together and discussed the merits of different strategies for judging progress, debating whether to take a primarily first-order or second-order concept focus in light of the range of articles we had read.³⁴

Figure 7: The first working draft of our history progress map

Framework common to all subjects			Knowledge	
				a) Causes
CREATE	Evaluate	Assessing theories; Comparison of ideas; Evaluating outcomes; Solving, judging, recommending and rating; Contrasting perspectives.	Original and independently researched evidence.	Evaluates different perspectives about the causes of events depending on the time, class or location.
	Application	Using concepts to create ideas; Design and invention; Composing; Predicting; Combining; Justify.	Wide ranging and carefully chosen evidence.*	Analyses how catalysts, short-term and long-term causes interact to explain events in the past.
COMBINE	Analysis	Identifying and analysing patterns; Organisation of ideas; Recognising trends; Conclude.	Carefully selected and precise range of evidence.	Explains how causes are linked. Explains why some causes are more important than others.
	Linking	Using the core; Solving problems using methods; Manipulating; Designing; Experimenting; Explain; Compare.	Relevant and appropriately selected evidence which may lack depth.	Explains causes of events in the past. Begins to explain why some causes are more important than others.
CORE	Understanding	Comprehension; Translating; Summarising; Demonstrating; Discussion; Describe.	Limited relevant factual material.	Describes some of the causes of events in the past.
	Knowledge	Remember; Recall of information; Discovery; Observation; Listing; Locating; Naming.	A little accurate and relevant material.	Gives basic unsupported facts about some causes of events in the past.

It was during this process that the team realised something that may not make us popular: we quite liked the old National Curriculum levels. We strongly disliked the way they had been abused by splitting them into multiple sub-levels or using them to judge teacher or student progress each year (particularly as expressed in the expectation that students must each ‘make two sub-levels of progress per year’). The old level descriptors were also too complex and wordy, making them extremely difficult for *us* to pick through, not to mention our students and their parents. Additionally, and this is partly our fault, the way they had been used in school left out reference to the necessary development and use of substantive knowledge. Both our mark-schemes and the way in which we used them had tended to prioritise demonstration of second-order conceptual understandings. But on the whole we valued the clear focus on those second-order concepts and the notion of using the structure of levels within the attainment target as an overarching progress map, both for teachers and for students, akin to how they were originally intended to be before the abuse set in! As a

result we were very wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

So we have attempted to address the particular problems that we had identified with the *use* of the old levels system, without rejecting the positive features inherent in its *structure*. The second-order concepts have been retained and allocated to separate columns to give clarity. Importantly, though, deployment of substantive knowledge was given its own column and prioritised by positioning it before any of the second-order concepts. This was done to make it visually important to students and to highlight that effective history requires effective deployment of accurate knowledge and depth of understanding.

The wording of *each* column took the team hours to refine to a point where we were happy with it. We discussed it as we ate our sandwiches during lunch breaks over the course of two weeks to get it right and we are sure that this will not be the last version. With the previous levels system it often felt

Understanding

b) Change and continuity	c) Significance	d) Interpretations	e) Source enquiry
Evaluates different perspectives about change and continuity depending on the time, class or location.	Evaluates different perspectives about significance depending on the time, class or location.	Evaluates different interpretations depending on evidence chosen, time, religion and politics.	Interrogates the source independently and uses it effectively. Considers the differing perspectives of a source.
Analyses a period of history to identify and explain periods of change.	Analyses significance in terms of short-term, medium-term and long-term impact.	Analyses the merits and weaknesses of different interpretations.	Analyses the source using contextual knowledge.
Identifies and explains turning points in history. Explains how rates of change can be different for different groups.	Compares reasons for and against judging something as important.	Explains clear reasons for different interpretations. Explains clearly the purpose of the interpretation.	Considers the nature, origin and purpose of the source. Evaluates the sources.
Detailed explanation of how things changed and stayed the same. Sound understanding of chronology.	Explains in detail the significance.	Begins to explain reasons for different interpretations. Considers the purpose of academic, educational, fictional interpretations.	Explains the source using details from it. Compares sources.
Able to describe some aspects that changed or stayed the same.	Gives reasons why some people or events are important.	Describes different opinions about events or people in the past.	Describes detail in the source.
Identifies aspects which changed or stayed the same.	Shows a basic unsupported opinion about significance.	Understands that different people have different opinions about events or people in the past.	Identifies surface level detail from the source.

*Note: 'evidence' in the knowledge column encompasses factual information (and not merely sources used as evidence)

like 'the tail was wagging the dog,' as assessment was often driving practice. By contrast, we wanted 'the dog to wag the tail' with the knowledge of what we knew worked well in the classroom and what makes good history used to inform our creation of the assessment system. As a result, the progress map is far more organic than a rigid handed-down system. It works for us, but we recognise that it may not work for others. Similarly, when we read Alex Ford's article last year, we doubted that his model would work for us but know it works brilliantly for him.³⁵

During these discussions we wondered about whether to cut 'change and continuity' as we will admit that at Redland Green it is the concept on which we have focused least attention. We all concluded that we could not do so, however, since it is a fundamental concept that was explicitly included in the National Curriculum and listed among the second-order concepts set out in the new GCSE objectives.³⁶ As a result the team have now been discussing how we can build in a more explicit focus on it within our Key Stage 3 lessons

to address this limitation in our schemes of learning. The contents of the 'significance' column may also appear curious to some as they really represent a hybrid of significance, importance and consequence; but this description emerged from what we know works in our classroom. Although we have experimented with using Counsell's '5 Rs' ('remembered', 'results', 'remarkable', 'resonant', 'revealing') to judge significance, in our lessons we ended up confusing the students.³⁷ (This is probably as a result of our teaching rather than an inherent problem in the suggested criteria!) The significance column, therefore, includes some of these ideas but simplifies them and builds on the approach that Richard adopted in the Hodder *Making Sense of History* series which presents significance more in terms of consequences.³⁸

Arguably, the process of producing this document was more important than the outcome. Its co-creation by the entire team meant that we now share a very clear idea about what progress in history means to us. This shared vision has led to open discussions about what we do well, and more

importantly what we need to improve in our lessons. The conversations that followed about individual schemes of work have been based on our vision and the criteria, thus removing any perceived personal criticism. This has allowed the process to become truly reflective and focused on good history. In the long term the process will also build greater consistency across Key Stage 3 lessons as we hold the same values and have a shared understanding of the definition of the concepts we are teaching. This will in turn lead to better outcomes for our students at Key Stage 3 and beyond.

This progress map will now be used to inform and guide the creation of the individual mark-schemes for the three official extended assessments per year that the senior leadership team require us to produce.³⁹ We have begun this process with a Year 9 piece on interpretations of life in East Germany using the wording from the map as a starting point for our mark-scheme, but adding specific criteria for this particular assessment. As we have begun using the progress map it has quickly become apparent that it needs tweaking, that it is provisional and will need to be carefully revised and changed in light of our experience, unlike the old levels, with which we were burdened.

Although we will readily admit that what we have strongly resembles the old National Curriculum levels, we believe we have a good assessment system both in design and in practice that will work more effectively. It keeps what we valued about the old levels system but attempts to iron out some of the limitations that inflicted significant damage on our practice. Importantly, the process of working collaboratively as a team has served to strengthen our shared understanding of what getting better at history looks like and we are now much better placed to support students' progress in our classrooms.

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- ¹ Department for Education (2014) National Curriculum and Assessment from September 2014: information for schools.
- ² See, for example, Burnham, S. and Brown, G. (2004) 'Assessment without levels descriptions' in *Teaching History*, 115, *Assessment without Levels? Edition*, pp. 5-15; and Lee, P. and Shemilt, D. (2003) 'A scaffold, not a cage: progression and progression models in history' in *Teaching History*, 113, *Creating Progress Edition*, pp. 13-23. See also Carr, E. and Counsell, C. (2014) 'Using time-lines in assessment' in *Teaching History*, 157, *Assessment Edition*, for their explanation that 'by 2000, managerial pressure to collapse all assessment into level descriptions was gathering pace' (p.56).
- ³ The format is a simple one – meet for a pizza and discuss ideas and practice – and we are indebted to Christine Counsell for the idea.
- ⁴ *Teaching History*, 157, *Assessment Edition* is dedicated to discussing assessment. Richard Kennett: <http://radicalhistory.co.uk/?p=395>; Sally Thorne: <http://sallythorne.com/2014/11/06/adventures-in-assessment-1/>; Alex Ford: <http://andallthat.co.uk/blog/category/teachers-assessment/>; Michael Fordham: <http://clioetceera.com/category/assessment/>; Harry Fletcher-Wood: <http://improvingteaching.co.uk/2014/09/06/dont-value-what-you-measure-measure-what-you-value/>; Nick Dennis: www.nickdennis.com/blog/tag/assessment/
- ⁵ National College for Teaching and Leadership (2014): www.psqm.org.uk/docs/beyond-levels-alternative-assessment-approaches-developed-by-teaching-schools.pdf
- ⁶ See, for example, Seixas, P. and Morton, T. (2012) *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*, Toronto: Nelson Education; and closer to home, Richard Kennett (2014) has also blogged about this: <http://radicalhistory.co.uk/?p=395>
- ⁷ Department for Education (2013) History programmes of study: Key Stage 3.
- ⁸ See, for example, Hammond, K. (2014) 'The knowledge that "flavours" a claim: towards building and assessing historical knowledge on three scales' in *Teaching History*, 157, *Assessment Edition*, pp. 18-25.
- ⁹ Our work in this area has been informed by the discussion of historical perspective in Byrom, J. (2013) 'Alive ... and kicking? Some personal reflections

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- ¹⁰ Both of these important aspects of assessment for learning are discussed in Brown, G. and Burnham, S. (2014) 'Assessment after levels' in *Teaching History*, 157, *Assessment Edition*, pp. 8-17; and in Fordham (2013) *op. cit.*
 - ¹¹ 'Adventures in Assessment' was presented at the annual Historical Association Conference, Bristol, 8-9 May, 2015.
 - ¹² I have written about threshold concepts in history more extensively on my blog: <http://sallythorne.com/2015/05/10/threshold-concepts-in-history-part-1/>
 - ¹³ For GCSE history first examined in the summer of 2018 there will be a new grading system with Grade 9 being the highest grade.
 - ¹⁴ Ofqual (2014) *History GCSE Subject Content*. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/310549/history_GCSE_formatted.pdf
 - ¹⁵ For more on 'threshold concepts' in history, I recommend Diaz, A., Middendorf, J., Pace, D. and Shopkow, L. (2008) 'The History Learning Project: a department "decodes" its students' in *The Journal of American History*, 94, no.4, pp. 1211-24; and Seixas and Morton (2012) *op. cit.*
 - ¹⁶ See Carr and Counsell, *op. cit.*
 - ¹⁷ The study of crime and punishment over time is one of the units offered within the Schools History Project GCSE specifications currently offered by the Edexcel and OCR Edexcel examining boards.
 - ¹⁸ Edexcel GCSE History, <http://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcse/history-2016.html>
 - ¹⁹ www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/biographies/biogdylanwiliam.asp, (retrieved 6 September 2014).
 - ²⁰ Department for Education (2013) *op. cit.*
 - ²¹ Harry Fletcher-Wood, *op. cit.*
 - ²² Department for Education (2013) *op. cit.*
 - ²³ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁴ Other relevant work on the limitations of tight writing frames includes Evans J. and Pate G. (2007) 'Does scaffolding make them fall?' in *Teaching History*, 128, *Beyond the Exam Edition*, pp.118-29 and Knight, O. (2008) "'Create something interesting to show that you have learned something": Building and assessing learner autonomy within the Key Stage 3 history classroom' in *Teaching History*, 131, *Assessing Differently Edition*, pp. 17-24.
 - ²⁵ King, M. (2015) 'The role of secure knowledge in enabling Year 7 to write essays on Magna Carta' in *Teaching History*, 159, *Underneath the Essay Edition*, p. 20.
 - ²⁶ Cunningham, D. (2004) 'Empathy without illusions' in *Teaching History*, 114, *Making History Personal Edition*, pp. 24-29.
 - ²⁷ For further work on the controversy associated with empathetic tasks see chapter 14 of Harris, R., Burn, K. and Woolley, M. (2014) *The Guided Reader to Teaching and Learning in History*, London: Routledge.
 - ²⁸ Fletcher-Wood, *op. cit.*
 - ²⁹ *Ibid.*
 - ³⁰ Fordham (2013) *op. cit.*
 - ³¹ Byrom, *op. cit.*
 - ³² Lee and Shemilt (2003) *op. cit.*
 - ³³ For Bloom's taxonomy see Bloom, B.S., Engelhart, M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., and Krathwohl, D.R. (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain*, New York: David McKay. For the SOLO taxonomy see Biggs, J. and Collis, K. (1982) *Evaluating the Quality of Learning: the SOLO taxonomy*, New York: Academic Press. The purpose of the common strands was to create consistency across subjects for reporting. In reports once a year students will be told the level at which they are currently working as demonstrated in their work, using 'Core', 'Combine' or 'Create' (with no sub-levels). Although the teachers will record whether they are secure or not in their achievement of each level, students will not receive this level of detail. The subject departments were given the task of defining these competencies within their subject. Each was told they needed to make a map of progression on a single side of A4 that would be shared with staff, students and parents.
 - ³⁴ See Brown and Burnham, *op. cit.*; Fordham (2013) *op. cit.*
 - ³⁵ Ford, A. (2014) 'Setting us free? Building meaningful models of progression for a post-levels world' in *Teaching History*, 157, *Assessment Edition*, pp. 28-41.
 - ³⁶ Department for Education (2013) *op. cit.*; Ofqual (2014) *op. cit.*
 - ³⁷ Counsell, C. (2004) 'Looking through a Josephine Butler-shaped window: focusing pupils' thinking on historical significance' in *Teaching History*, 114, *Making History Personal Edition*, pp. 30-33.
 - ³⁸ Hodder Education, *Making Sense of History* series.
 - ³⁹ This was heavily influenced by Burnham and Brown, *op. cit.* and by Brown and Burnham, *op. cit.*